

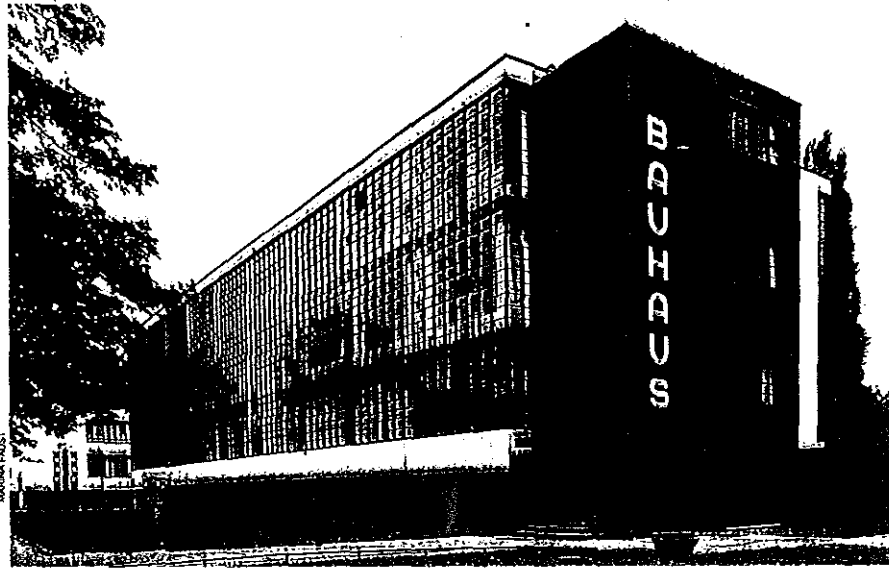
HISTORIC ARCHITECTURE: THE BAUHAUS

Revisiting Walter Gropius's Seminal Buildings in Dessau, Germany

By Nicholas Fox Weber

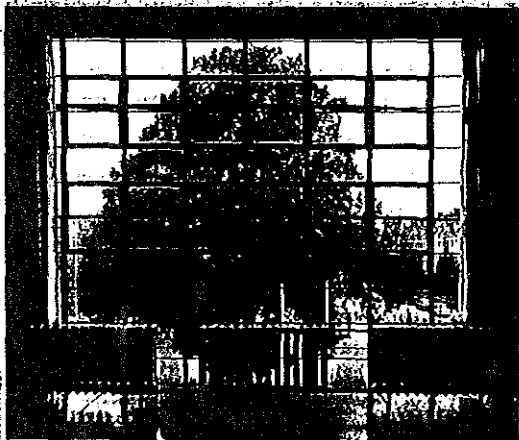
IN 1925 THE BAUHAUS school, which had opened six years earlier in the charming and ancient town of Weimar, moved northeast to Dessau. The city would provide the financial support that Weimar was withdrawing, but it was a far less enticing spot. Both locations were in the eastern part of Germany, within easy reach of Berlin or Dresden by train, but Dessau lacked Weimar's rich history and ambiance. At first viewing, the new setting offered none of the charms of the previous one.

When the wives of Wassily Kandinsky and Georg Muche, two of the



The Bauhaus moved in 1925, six years after its inception in Weimar, Germany, to Dessau, marking a new era and identity for the institution. Under architect Walter Gropius's directorship and with new buildings funded by the city and designed by him, the school was able to cement its aspirations to erase the boundaries between art and function.

ABOVE: "This building has been created . . . for the creatively talented young people who someday will mold the face of our new world," proclaimed Gropius on the opening day of the Bauhaus building in 1926, which today appears much as it did. The current institution hopes that ties with the West will bring an interest in renovation. LEFT: Expanses of glass and radiators left as architectural elements in their own right herald the beginnings of modernism. BELOW: Early masters of the Dessau Bauhaus included, from left, Wassily Kandinsky, with his wife, Nina, Georg Muche, Paul Klee and Gropius.



Bauhaus masters, were delegated to look around Dessau, the large neighborhoods of workers' quarters made a grim impression. But later, their response "improved to the point of utter enthusiasm," as Lyonel Feininger wrote to his wife, Julia, that February. "For the Masters they are going to put up special buildings according to our own wishes and plans, in the wonderful park, homes to be finished by October! With studios right on top of the house! Water everywhere: the Mulde meets the Elbe, watersports,



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sailing—fishing—motor boating." The houses, to be designed by Bauhaus founder and director Walter Gropius, would be solid and spacious. They would exemplify all the advances—technological as well as aesthetic—of the pioneering architecture the school had helped nurture. The move had much to offer after all.

Life at the Bauhaus had come a long way in six years. When the experimental institution opened in Weimar in 1919, it required a willingness for urban camping out. There were classrooms and workshops but no housing for students or faculty.

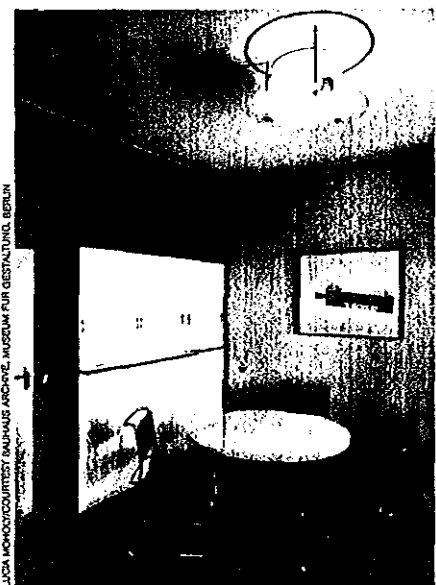
The school was more an idea than a campus. Gropius had articulated the underlying concept of the new organization in a simple four-page flyer: The Bauhaus was to be a place where "proficiency in a craft" was recognized and fostered as "the prime source of creative imagination," and where the barriers between craft and art were obliterated.

The cover of the flyer, however, showed no modern classrooms or workshops as the setting of these new ideals; rather, it was illustrated by a woodcut of a Gothic cathedral, an image made by the young American artist Lyonel Feininger. The cathedral represented a building in which architects, craftspeople, sculptors and painters all linked forces and remained anonymous, suppressing self-promotion in favor of artistic achievement and the good of humanity. That the symbol itself was centuries old did not matter. Although the

BELOW: "The way to learn to understand architecture is to have direct experience of space itself," wrote László Moholy-Nagy, who taught metal shop and lived in one of the houses. His dining room contained chairs—designed by Marcel Breuer—light fixtures and built-in cabinets all made in the Bauhaus workshop



LESLY WINKLER

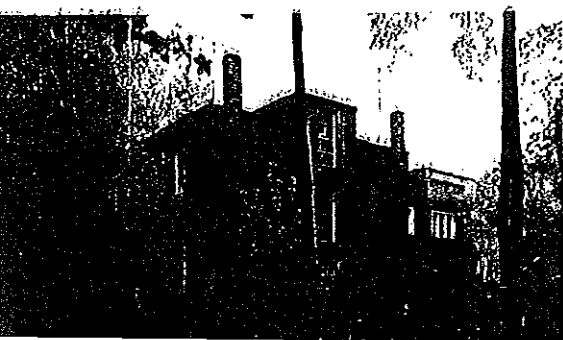


LUCIA MONDOLCOURTESY BAUHAUS ARCHIV, MUSEUM FÜR GESTALTUNG, BERLIN

The artistic freedom of the masters was augmented by Dessau's mayor, Fritz Hesse, who allocated money to build houses for them. BELOW: A drawing by Carl Fieger shows Gropius's houses—one for the director and three duplexes—which followed the Bauhaus ideal of advancing the "development of present-day housing, from the simplest household appliances to the finished dwelling."



LESLY WINKLER



LESLY WINKLER

TOP LEFT: Until the members of the Bauhaus were forced out by the Nazis in 1932, painters Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky shared one of the duplexes, the exteriors of which remain essentially the same. In a 1936 letter to Klee, Kandinsky reminisced about their tenure in Dessau: "[I] often recall the time when we were neighbors, how we watered the plants at the same time, and our games of bowls and—sad memory—the joint complaints about the Bauhaus meetings." LEFT: American artist Lyonel Feininger, master of painting, lived in one of the houses for six years. Each residence contained a spacious double-height studio, a luxury not known to the masters in Weimar. Upon moving in, he wrote his wife, "Here is some real space, and it feels like being in the open. . . . Altogether one can honestly speak of a creation, of a new achievement in building."

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Bauhaus hoped to promulgate a new style, devoid of ornament and obedient to the machine, it did not initially turn its back on older forms. The town of Weimar was, after all, a place where the students' stomping grounds were the eighteenth-century Belvedere Castle and buildings once inhabited by Goethe, Liszt and Nietzsche. And the school's first headquarters—the former Grand-Ducal Saxon Academy of Art and School of Arts and Crafts, both designed by architect Henry van de Velde at the beginning of the century—were in a gently sloping Art Nouveau style, with modified mansard roofs that recollected much earlier eras.

The Bauhaus's move to Dessau asserted its break from the past with more authority. The school had fallen on hard times in Weimar, provoking considerable public hostility and eventually losing essential financial support from the rightist Thuringian government. Though there was an outside support group of sixteen comprising the era's greatest luminaries—"The Friends of the Bauhaus" included Marc Chagall in Paris, Albert Einstein in Berlin and Josef Hoffmann, Oskar Kokoschka and Arnold Schönberg in Vienna—the future of the institution was still in doubt. Fortunately, the enlightened mayor of Dessau, Dr. Fritz Hesse, came to the rescue. It was he who invited the school to reestablish itself, and who came up with funding for the masters' houses as well as for a major complex of new buildings.

The masters cabled their assent to Hesse's invitation, and Gropius quickly set about designing both the houses and the stunning Bauhaus headquarters that would brandish to the world the look of its straightforward, industrial architecture. Completed in 1926, the main Bauhaus building featured steel window casements, a curtain wall of glass and stovepipe railings on cantilevered balconies as the stuff of beauty. The form of the double staircase inside

may have harked back to earlier times, but what once would have been decorated with stucco angels was now entirely devoid of ornamentation. Its aesthetic kick derived not from rococo panels but from the crisp interlocking of black and white planes. Door handles looked like carefully executed machine parts. Tubes of lighting and the rods that supported them were just that and nothing more. The furniture was undisguised canvas and tubular steel. László Moholy-Nagy in the metal workshop and Marcel Breuer in cabinetmaking combined forces with Gropius much as Gothic craftsmen had centuries earlier, and the collaboration resulted in a building with a rare consistency and unity.

The masters' houses financed by the city of Dessau were exactly as promised. They went up in a pleasant residential neighborhood situated in a thin pine forest some fifteen minutes by foot from the main Bauhaus building. There was room for seven masters and their families—

The masters' houses affronted bourgeois luxury in their starkness and severity.

a single house for the director and three two-family dwellings. On the wide Burgkühnauer Allee, a boulevard that was lined on one side by older residences, the masters' houses both embraced bourgeois luxury in their location and affronted it in their starkness and severity.

Whatever the neighbors may have thought of the unadorned white plaster walls of Gropius's houses, the new dwellings were sheer bliss for their residents. Each had a big level lawn, terraces and roof gardens. There were large living rooms, quiet bedrooms and ample, well-lit studio spaces. Ev-

erything worked and had a clean and refreshing appearance. The houses may have been erected quickly, but they were nevertheless solidly constructed. Dessau spared no expense, lavishing eighty-six thousand German marks on the director's house and about eighty-four thousand on each half of the two-family structures, a fortune at the time. Having taken considerable risks in joining the Bauhaus—many had forsaken greater security elsewhere—the masters now gained a sense of their own worth. The houses proved that they could live well at the same time that they made radical art, and that they were esteemed by others.

It was quite a neighborhood. The first house, the director's, was inhabited by Gropius from its completion in 1926 until 1928, by Hannes Meyer for the next two years and by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe until the closing of the Dessau Bauhaus in 1932. The tenants of the next structure were, on one side, first Moholy-Nagy and then Josef Albers; Lyonel Feininger was in the other half for all six years. In the next house, one half went first to Georg Muche and then to Hinnerk Scheper; the other side was Oskar Schlemmer's. The last house was occupied throughout this time period by Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. You could have done no better anywhere in the world for a concentration of pioneers in architecture, painting, photography and choreography. Although it was only the male masters to whom the houses were allotted, some of them had wives of equal talent and stature—Anni Albers as a weaver, Lucia Moholy-Nagy as a photographer. Of course, many of these people had children as well; an unusual aftermath of neighborhood life occurred years later when Paul Klee's son, Felix, and the daughter of Hannes Meyer were married, having known each other in Dessau.

The houses were built to free people from the encumbrances of everyday living, to minimize household

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tasks and to enable them to focus on work. Gropius's philosophy was that "smooth and sensible functioning of daily life is not an end in itself, it merely constitutes the condition for achieving a maximum of personal freedom and independence." With this goal in mind, he and Breuer designed handsome built-in cabinets for glassware and china, wall cupboards and built-ins for the bedrooms, even perfectly positioned plate-drying racks in the kitchen—all to make life run as efficiently as possible. There was a place for everything. If they wanted, they could use chairs and tables from the furniture workshop at the school, or they could put antiques into their rooms, as did Feininger. But no matter what, each master had a wonderful two-story studio, its size stressing the supremacy of art in the life of the inhabitants, its exposure to the northern light reflecting the care that had gone into details.

Despite their seamless design, the masters' houses would sustain great damage. In 1932 the Nazi party gained a majority representation in the Dessau legislature. The party leaders arranged to inspect the school and were shown around by Lord Mayor Hesse and Mies van der Rohe. They concluded that the Bauhaus should be closed at once. A Dessau newspaper reported the decision on July 10 of that year: "The disappearance of this so-called 'Institute of Design' will mean the disappearance from German soil of one of the most prominent places of Jewish-Marxist 'art' manifestation. May the total demolition follow soon and may on the same spot where today stands the somber glass palace of oriental taste, the 'aquarium' as it has been popularly dubbed in Dessau, soon rise homesteads and parks that will provide German people with homes and places for relaxation."

The National Socialists, however, could not get the necessary majority vote for the demolition of the Bauhaus buildings. They were forced to find alternative uses for the school's

former workshops. In the course of the 1930s the building served as a workshop for Third Reich architect Albert Speer, a school for German mothers and a storage facility for the nearby Junkers aircraft company. Junkers kept oil paper there, and when the Bauhaus was bombed in the 1940s, the heat of the fire was so intense that the steel framing bowed. After the war, the city of Dessau decided to rebuild the structure so that it could be used as a trade school. But there was little thought given to its architectural character, and it was reconstructed poorly, with small windows in small walls.

Between 1976 and 1978 the Bauhaus was finally rebuilt in a manner very much in keeping with its original appearance. Today it is again alive and well, if in a very different form from what was conceived by Walter Gropius. The Bauhaus Dessau is now an institute that brings together recently graduated architecture and design students to work on

Even on gray days, Gropius's Bauhaus building has tremendous life and clarity.

concrete projects in an atelierlike environment. While the aims of the present organization may be more practical than idealistic, it continues to thrive in a manner and spirit that would have pleased the original masters. Most of the students come from the former East Germany, but with the reunification of Germany, there is hope that the Bauhaus will expand and welcome students from all over the world, for anything from a few days to a year.

The current Bauhaus also mounts exhibitions devoted to the original school and is in the process of creating a collection of artifacts and docu-

ments. No object, of course, is more impressive than the building itself. Even on cold, gray, drizzly winter days when it is hard to imagine being uplifted in Dessau—a city badly in need of a few traffic lights and some rudimentary repairs to its streets—Gropius's structure has tremendous life and clarity. The steel window supports and rhythmic balconies have a lightness; the interior staircase remains a crisp amalgam of angles.

The masters' houses are in less fortunate condition. To see them today is to see a faint and rather dreary shadow of the past. The director's house was destroyed by bombing, and a new structure stands on its foundation. When the three double houses were rebuilt, they were made without the large studio windows. Anni and Josef Albers's duplex is today a doctor's office. Klee's and Kandinsky's house has been chopped into an apartment building for at least six families and has fallen into disrepair. With all three buildings, the perfect expanses of smooth plaster are now chipped and crumbly, the impeccable interiors a mess of flimsily rebuilt rooms and leaking ceilings. The pervasive white has been replaced by cheap yellows and reds.

But anyone with a feeling for history can experience the Bauhaus. The balcony railings may be rusted, but even in their decayed form they recall the old days of glory. One can still look at the lovely woods in which Paul Klee would listen to birds chirping at dawn, and one can still admire the thick plaster walls and simple windows of the structures in which Kandinsky made his radical abstractions and Schlemmer conceived his ballet. Moreover, with the Bauhaus now in the hands of energetic people who respect its past and have dreams for its future, the masters' houses, run-down as they are, give reason for optimism. It may be possible again to savor the atmosphere that nurtured a concentration of some of the most influential minds of our century. □